Spinoza's Quasi-Fictionalist Account of Religion[1]

Michael A. Rosenthal

Abstract: Most scholars claim that Spinoza's critique of religion involves replacing a false and pernicious form of imaginative superstition with a true and rational religion based on a philosophical love of God. In this paper I argue that in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza offers a different, third view, in which he replaces superstition not with reason but with a reformed imaginative view that is analogous to, but not identical with, a philosophical understanding of God. The narratives, rituals, and dogmas of religion are, in Spinoza's terminology, "beings of reason" (*ens rationis*), though we would call them "fictions," which lead to "moral" if not "mathematical" certainty. As contemporary fictionalists argue, these constructs are not true, and do not refer directly to anything in the world, yet they may be useful. They are born of a practical desire to make sense of our world to act for the sake of mutual interest and well-being. In conclusion, I shall discuss some qualifications and objections to this "fictionalist" reading of Spinoza's view of religion.

Keywords: Spinoza, Religion, Fictionalism, Superstition, Imagination, Beings of Reason.

Introduction

By the time Spinoza gets to chapter 12 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth, TTP), he knows that he has a problem. He has shown that the biblical text is "faulty, mutilated, corrupted, and inconsistent; that we have only fragments of it, and finally, that the original text of the covenant God made with the Jews has been lost." (12.1; III/158; CII/248)[2] Nonetheless, he wants to maintain that

1 I wrote the initial draft of this paper at the invitation of Thomas Schmidt for a lecture at the Goethe University on June 7, 2022, just as the pandemic was subsiding and public events became possible again. At the time, I was a fellow at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften in Bad Homburg. I am grateful to Thomas not only for the invitation for this lecture, but also for his remarkable hospitality on many occasions in Frankfurt, for our many conversations over the years, for the intellectual stimulation of his work, and, above all, for his friendship.

2 I refer to Spinoza's writings by work, chapter, and section or paragraph number. I will then refer to the volume and page number of the standard edition of original works, and then to the English translation. The original language material can be found in: Spinoza/Gebhardt (1925). The translation I use is: Spinoza (1985 & 2016). If I refer to a page number in the translation, I will refer to it with a "C" and the relevant volume number, e.g., "C2". The translation of the political works, including the TTP,

> "[f]or both reason itself and the statements of the Prophets and Apostles clearly proclaim that God's eternal word and covenant, and true religion, are inscribed by divine agency in men's hearts, i.e., in the human mind, and that this is the true original text of God, which he himself has stamped with his seal, i.e., with the idea of him, as an image of his divinity." (12.2; III/158; CII/248)

How is it possible that this corrupted and faulty text can also be called "sacred" [*sacro*] and the "word of God" [*Verbum Dei*]?

One possible answer that cannot be right is that the literal text of the Bible is the divine word because it comes directly from God. But, of course, Spinoza has given us many reasons to reject the claim of direct and unadulterated transmission. Another possible answer is that, even if the literal text is not true in itself, it nonetheless points to the truth by way of allegory. On this reading, there is an apparent contradiction between the literal text, which is based on metaphors based on reference to the material world, and the underlying rational meaning of the text. When such a conflict occurs, the philosopher knows not to read the image literally but to consider it a sign of some immaterial truth.

We know, from chapter 15, that Spinoza considers this second strategy, which he attributes to Maimonides, as problematic. It assumes that the literal text is, contrary to Spinoza's view, not actually faulty. For the allegory to work, there must be a systematic relation between the literal and rational meanings. The literal is a sign, given to us by God as part of his providential scheme, that serves the ignorant by stimulating them to good deeds through images and passions that move them and the learned by grounding them systematically in rational truths. If the text is corrupted, then this reading is either a random if happy coincidence or a cunning form of manipulation by the exegete, inserting his meaning where there is none through elaborate artifice.

The apparent solution to this tension is the distinction that Spinoza makes between two kinds of religion, what he calls "superstition," on the one hand, and "true religion," on the other.

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is found in volume 2 of the Curley translation. As is standard, references to the Ethics [E], will use the following abbreviations: Part number, d [definition], ax [axiom], p [proposition] number, dem [demonstration], c [corollary], and s [scholium].

The first kind of religion is the explicit target of much of the TTP. It is what Spinoza labels as "superstition."[3] There are really two kinds of superstition. The first, or naïve, kind stems from the basic predicament of man, as Spinoza sketches it at the beginning of the Preface: as subject to the vicissitudes of fortune—the effects of external things on us—we alternate wildly between hope and fear, seeking and being susceptible to any more systematic explanation of our situation. The second, more sophisticated, kind invokes concepts that are not born of reason but of the conflation of images, what we might term pseudo-philosophy. Some of these imaginative concepts are implicit in naïve superstition, but with Christianity their use by the Apostles becomes explicit and significant.

The other kind of religion is what, strictly speaking, we can call "philosophical religion" in Spinoza.[4] The basis of this religion are true ideas about God, the will, our affects, and our fellow human beings. When we form these ideas and act on their basis, we experience an accompanying affective joy that stimulates us to further action based on reason. Unlike in the second kind of religion, in which the religious concept is primary and the "translation" of it is only an analogy with reason, in this case, the translation works the other way: a rational concept is translated more directly into a religious one. For instance, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza articulates a rational idea of substance, which he then identifies with the religious term "God," thus forcing the reader to correct the naïve or philosophically flawed idea of God with the rational one. It is this idea of religion that has led some to suggest that Spinoza could simply do without the religious language and concepts, even though he specifically denies this in the penultimate proposition of Part V of the *Ethics*.[5]

It appears that the relation between true religion and superstition is binary and hierarchical. It is based on Spinoza's epistemic distinction between reason and the imagination, in which reason is a superior and privileged form of knowing the truth and the nature of the world, while the imagination is a "confused," "partial," and "mutilated" set of images that lead to falsity and error. To the extent, then, that religion is rational, it is true religion; to the extent that it is based on the imagination, it is superstition. Of course, when we encounter religions in the world, this binary typology is not always so evident. They seem to involve a mixed bag of beliefs, narratives,

3 For a historically informed account of Spinoza's concept of superstition, see James (2012), especially the introduction.

4 For a survey of this concept, see Fraenkel (2012).

5 See, for instance, Nadler (2011).

rituals, and ceremonial practices, in which the true aspects are not easily separated from the superstitious. Spinoza seems to suggest that we can sift through religious practices, separating the nuggets of truth from the dross of superstition (for example, in letter 73; see just below).

However, there are several reasons to question this binary account. Spinoza points out that the difference between these two kinds of religion, between superstition and true religion, is not related to its intrinsic cognitive content as much as to its use.

> What is called sacred and divine is what is destined for the practice of piety and religion. It will be sacred only so long as men use it in a religious manner. If they cease to be pious, at the same time it too ceases to be sacred. And if they dedicate the same thing to impious purposes, then what before was sacred is made unclean and profane. (12.9; III/160; CII/149–50)

In his glossary-index entry on "religion" in the second volume (CII/653-54), Edwin Curley discusses this issue. He writes that "[i]n Letter 73 Spinoza says that the chief difference between religion and superstition is that religion has wisdom as its foundation, whereas superstition has ignorance as its foundation" (IV/308a–309a). But Curley then goes on to point out that this distinction means that much of the content of religions such as Judaism and Christianity is superstition. It is clear from much of the discussion of the TTP that Spinoza does not mean to do away with concrete forms of religious life and replace them with a universal religion of reason, as much as reform these practices in ways that are conducive to highlighting the results of their practices, particularly the pursuit of justice and lovingkindness (*charitas*). As he emphasizes throughout the work, he sides with the Apostle James (James 2:17) over Paul in claiming that "faith by itself, without works, is dead" (XIV.14; GIII/175). And, as we shall see, it does not account for how the complex interplay of beliefs and practices in a religion, even those that are deemed to be false in some sense, can produce the virtuous states of affairs—i.e., justice and lovingkindness—that define true religions.

In what follows, I will argue that there is a different way to solve this problem, one that offers a more complex view of religion than the binary picture. Instead, I think that, for Spinoza, there is not one universal religion; nor are there two religions, one superstitious based on the imagination and another true one based on reason; but three kinds of religion. Where do I find this third kind? The TTP teaches us that there are, in fact,

two kinds of imaginative religion: one superstitious and one reformed, in addition to the rational religion of the *Ethics*. Hence, the notion of "true religion" is ambiguous between the reformed version that we find in the TTP and the philosophical version that we find in the *Ethics*. This corresponds precisely to the two kinds of truth that Spinoza discusses in the TTP: mathematically true, which admits of a precise deductive solution, and morally true, which is true only insofar as it leads to something that is good for us, relatively speaking. As I will show, the conceptual space for this distinction is found in the theory of the imagination itself, specifically in the notion of a "being of reason" (*ens rationis*), which Spinoza describes as (despite its name) an imaginative "mode of thinking" that helps us retain and explain things for practical purposes.[6] This is what I think is the historical version of what we call nowadays "fictionalism."[7] In other words, the words do not refer directly to anything objectively real outside of the mind yet serve a practical purpose by orienting us in relation to others and the world. If we apply this to religious narratives, for example, then we can see that while they might be strictly speaking false, they might produce effects that are either bad for us (hence superstitious) or good (true religion). Despite the infinite number of possible fictions, Spinoza does think that there are some indirect constraints on which of them will serve their purpose. True religion in the second sense, as philosophical religion grounded directly in science, can knowingly or unknowingly (via experience) serve as a constraint on these stories. This constraint or limit on imaginative fictions is the basis for the "quasi" in the title. Although he understands how variable religious belief and practice can be, he does not sever it from some relation to the truth. True imaginative religion then is a felicitous analogue to what reason might teach.

Reason and the Imagination

So let us start with the foundation of knowledge in Spinoza's system, which is reason, and then turn to the imagination. In proposition 40, scholium 2, of Part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza lays out his theory in the schematic form of three kinds of knowledge:

6 See my paper, Rosenthal (2019).
7 There is a large literature on this topic. For a good introduction, see Sainsbury (2010).

> From what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:
> I. from singular things that have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason, I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;
> II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.
> III. Finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, and P40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.
> [IV.] In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate.

Thus, we have imagination, reason, and intuition. For the purposes of this paper, we can set aside the third or intuitive kind of knowledge. As for the other two, from these descriptions, it is not hard to guess the relative epistemic status and worth. As he writes in the following proposition,

> Knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and of the third kind is necessarily true. (E2p41)

We need to say a bit more to explain this claim. Reason, Spinoza claims, is necessarily true. It is an idea that refers to:

> Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately. (E2p38)

Because truth is its "own standard" (2p43s), Spinoza thinks that when we have such an idea, we immediately know that it is true. In contrast, the imagination derives from an idea of some external body as it acts upon us:

> Next, to retain the customary words, the affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the [NS: external] figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines. (2p17s)

In itself the image is not strictly speaking false. However, it is only true in the sense that it expresses some particular aspect or perspective in nature. The problem is that we very quickly infer all kinds of further information about the world from this mere slice of it. For example, we think that the image is directly of the external body when, in fact, it tells us more about our own or that the body is still present to us when, in fact, it is the memory of it as imprinted on our brain, etc.[8]

Spinoza describes the imagination much like he described Scripture: it is inadequate (2p29), partial, mutilated, confused (2p28; 2p29c) and based on extrinsic (rather than intrinsic) denominations of things. As he writes,

> I say expressly that the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused [NS: and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, i.e., so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences, and oppositions. For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly, as I shall show below. (E2p29c)

The paradox is that even as the imagination presents something as existing, it is more often than not presenting something that does not strictly speaking exist. In this way, there is also a problematic metaphysical status for imaginative entities:

> For as far as the difference between a true and a false idea is concerned, it is established from P35 that the true is related to the false as being is to nonbeing. (E2p43s)

Let us remember from the first long quote in this section that this problem is effectively doubled in the imagination. There is a problem of mutilated and partial reference in the case of a single or set of single images. Yet this is also true in the case of complex images constructed with the aid of signs. Indeed, Spinoza devoted a long scholium just before this passage to the process and problematic nature of constructed universals. From a small set of images, we abstract or ignore some to construct the idea of a universal. For example, from one four-legged furry beast, we infer a similarity to

8 See Spinoza's discussion of the associative mechanisms of the imagination and memory in E2p17 through E2p19.

others, which in turn we conflate together to form an idea of a general being of this type, which we name "dog," and on the basis of which we presume to find similar instances. Of course, the universal quality is no more than the set of particulars that formed our comparison set in the first place, yet we have a tendency to believe otherwise, to take this limited set and universalize it, compounding the error many times over.[9]

This does not mean, however, that the imagination is *necessarily* false. As Spinoza says in E2p41s, the imagination is the "cause" of falsity and not false in itself. It could lead to error, but it does not always do so. In part this is because there must be something positive in an image (inadequate idea) that ties them in some way to what exists and what is true to some degree:

> There is nothing positive in ideas that constitutes the form of falsity (by P33); but falsity cannot consist in an absolute privation (for it is Minds, not Bodies, which are said to err, or be deceived), nor also in absolute ignorance. (E2p35dem)

This is especially true for simple images, but it might also be the case for complex ideas of things, like pseudo-universals. But the question is "in virtue of what are these images true?" There is no direct representation of something true, for that would just be reason. There cannot be an allegorical representation of the rational truth for the same reasons that we saw above in the case of the superficial meaning of Scripture itself, namely, that the partial perspective lacks the information to be translated into a more rational discourse. It must be that there is just a fragment of this truth in the translation.

Beings of Reason

The idea that the imagination often leads to error but does not always do so, opens up the possibility of another use and more positive appraisal of its worth. In this context, as a bridge back to our discussion of religion, we can look to Spinoza's discussion of what he calls, following the medieval scholastics whose terms were appropriated by his Dutch Cartesian contemporaries, "beings of reason." As a preliminary, let me note two things about this notion. First, Spinoza almost always treats these "beings of reason" as products not of the rational intellect but of the imagination. They appear

9 See Newlands (2017).

to have a calculating dimension (what Hobbes would minimally call "reason"[10]), but for Spinoza this does not take the guise of true reason (see example of the calculations after E2p41s). Second, these beings are already on the second level of the imagination, as Spinoza categorizes it, involving signs and complex relations of images.

Spinoza provides his most extensive discussion of "beings of reason" in his early works, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE), the *Short Treatise* (KV), and the *Cogitata Metaphysica* (CM), the short appendix containing his own views that he appended to his summary of Cartesian philosophy. This is not the place to survey this topic. It should suffice to focus on the account in the CM, where he begins the text by discussing chimaeras, fictions, and beings of reason, which he defines as

> nothing but a mode of thinking, which helps us to more easily retain, explain, and imagine the things we have understood. (CM 1,1)

Immediately after defining the term, he refers to the metaphysical problem that goes along with it. The late scholastic, Francisco Suarez, had written the last section of *Disputationes Metaphysicae* on beings of reason but felt compelled to justify the inclusion of ideas that do not refer to anything real in a treatise devoted to the proper subject of metaphysics, that is, real being.[11] Spinoza also has something, though much briefer, to say on the subject. After discussing the function of these notions, he comments: "being is badly described as divided between being and non-being" (CM 1,1). The point is that Spinoza introduces a third space between the truth of reason, which refers to real being (i.e., substance and its modes, adequately conceived), and the falsity of the imagination, which refers to nothing that really exists. Although recently some commentators have argued that these "modes of thinking" are constructs of reason,[12] without getting too deeply into the textual evidence, I think that it is clear and striking, from the early works to the late, that Spinoza places these constructs squarely in the realm of the imagination. In the *Ethics*, he recognizes that the name itself can be confusing, given his account of the genesis

10 See Hobbes (2012), 64.
11 Suárez (1995).
12 See, for example, Hübner (2016).

of these cognitive modes, and says that they are perhaps better described as "beings of the imagination."[13]

Let us quickly sketch some examples of these various functions before we return to the matter of religion. He writes:

> We also have modes of thinking which serve to explain a thing by determining it through comparison to another. The modes of thinking by which we do this are called time, number, and measure, and perhaps there are other besides. Of these, time serves to explain duration, number discrete. (CM 1,1)

In addition to time and arguably mathematics, Spinoza also thinks that our thinking about parts and whole (KV 1,2 [I/19]), the idea of the will as a distinct power of the mind, models of human nature (E4Preface), and, importantly for our purposes, value terms like beautiful and ugly, good and evil, are all examples of beings of reason (CM 1,1). Here is what he says about the latter in the *Short Treatise*:

> Some things are in our intellect and not in Nature; so these are only our own work, and they help us to understand things distinctly. Among these we include all relations, which have reference to different things. These we call beings of reason. So the question now is whether good and evil should be regarded as beings of reason or as real beings. But since good and evil are nothing but relations, they must, beyond any doubt, be regarded as beings of reason. (KV 1,10; I/49)

Spinoza emphasizes that in all these cases the proper stance to take towards evaluating the content and use of these artifices is not that they are true or false—because they do not refer to anything real, as we have seen—but whether they are useful to us, which he defines (for example in *Ethics*, Part IV, definition 1) as good or bad. As he writes in his *Metaphysical Thoughts*:

> Still, these modes of thinking cannot be called ideas, nor can they be said to be true or false, just as love cannot be called true or false, but [only] good or bad. (CM 1,10)

13 "We see, therefore, that all the notions by which ordinary people are accustomed to explain nature are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination. And because they have names, as if they were [notions] of beings existing outside the imagination, I call them beings, not of reason, but of imagination" (E1appendix; II/83; C1/445–46).

We should note that this evaluative stance towards beings of reason itself involves a kind of recursive circularity, since the very terms good and bad are themselves defined as beings of reason. This point will come to bear again later.

In any case, here I want to point out that the general structure and purposes of beings of reason are consistent with what we find in Spinoza's account of religion in the TTP, especially in the case of the ancient Israelites but also in his discussion of the Apostles and the development and nature of Christianity. In a general sense, religion involves imaginative structures that: 1) help us collect and retain individual and collective experiences, particularly through chronicles and narratives; 2) explain experiences that make no apparent sense to us, in part by inserting them into larger divine narratives or sometimes by making pseudo-philosophical claims (especially in the case of the Apostles); and 3) establish standards on the basis of laws that compare and value our actions, as well as direct them to ends that we deem to be useful (good) for us.

As we shall see, it is often thought that these elements of religion (the narratives, explanations, and laws) are "true" and that we are required to believe them as such. It is very important for my interpretation that Spinoza does not deny this claim. Rather, in the TTP he distinguishes between what is "mathematically certain" and what is "morally certain" (II.12; XV.27–28, 36–37). Spinoza thinks that the ancient Israelites did not claim mathematical certainty for their narratives, only moral certainty. Thus, using our more recent concept of "fictionalism" to describe this account, we can say that these religious narratives are false—that is, not mathematically certain or true in the sense that they give us adequate knowledge about ourselves in nature—but nonetheless useful—that is, morally certain in the sense that they help us practically in the world.

Three Kinds of Religion

With this account of beings of reason and the possibility of a "third" way of the imagination between illusion and reality, we can return to the different accounts of religion that I mentioned above.

Let us recall the initial binary structure of religious experience. On the one hand, there is naïve religion, which arises out of the pressing existential conditions that Spinoza describes in the Preface to the TTP:

> If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition. But often they are in such a tight spot that they cannot decide on any plan. (Pref.1; GIII/5)

People in this state vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear and are likely to accept any explanation that augurs a better future. Thus, they accept even the craziest views, which then subject them to the power of other, equally ignorant but more manipulative men. On the other hand, there is philosophical religion, which, as Spinoza writes in the third chapter of the TTP, involves "knowing things through their first causes" (III.12; GIII/46). In the TTP, Spinoza only provides a truncated account of this religion of reason. He does think that it is a species of revelation in the general sense of knowledge of God, but it is not particular to any individual or group of people. It is knowledge of God (or nature) through the eternal laws of nature. In other words, as he will develop at length in the *Ethics*, we must know God through reason as expressed in the immutable laws of nature, which produces a deep intellectual love that leads us to our beatitude.

However, returning to Scripture, Spinoza is quite explicit that, while the prophets are good in some crucial sense, they are not philosophers and do not enjoy this kind of knowledge. In a decisive break with the medieval philosophical tradition, of which he takes Moses Maimonides to be the exemplary representative, Spinoza argues that prophets are distinguished not by their excellence in reason but by their imaginative ability and their good intentions. This description establishes the basis for a third kind of religion, one that is neither superstitious nor rational. The double character of the prophets needs to be underlined. If they were only characterized by imaginative power, then they could be like the unscrupulous charlatans who take advantage of men in their primal vacillation between hope and fear. If they were only well-intended, then they would not have the power to convince and lead others in the right direction. With both these qualities, they are in a position to formulate imaginative narratives, explanations, and imperatives that can guide not only themselves but also others.[14]

This third way of religion is, as we have seen, not anomalous within Spinoza's system. Rather, it fits perfectly into the category of the modes of thinking that Spinoza calls "beings of reason," which are imaginative constructs that are not necessarily true in the mathematical sense, but only in the moral sense of being useful. This intermediate religious stance is im-

14 See Rosenthal (2023).

portant to understand the sense in which Scripture itself can be understood as "sacred." As he writes in chapter 12 of the TTP:

> From this it follows that nothing is sacred or profane or impure in itself, outside the mind, but only in relation to the mind. Many passages in Scripture establish this with utmost clarity. (XII.12; GIII/160)

In other words, the words of the prophets, i.e., Scripture itself, are "modes of thinking," or imaginative constructs that do not express true metaphysical claims about God but rather claims that are morally true insofar as they lead the followers to practice acts of justice and charity.

Prophetic religion bears a complex relation to the other kinds of religion. As I shall discuss in a moment, it does bear an important relation to philosophical religion. It is, to state the claim baldly, an ersatz or analogue to rational religion. (There can be many of these.) However, it is epistemically and practically far closer to superstition than it is to the religion of reason. The difference between superstition and prophetic religion is that within the imagination there is a second level of critical reflection. We have already seen this function sketched within the account of prophecy in chapters one and two of the TTP. The prophet, through experience, takes a critical stance towards the naïve beliefs and unreflective practices of his fellow Jews, which generates both hostility and dynamic movement within the community. Moreover, Spinoza has also given us, as readers of the Bible, another way to embody this critical spirit within the imagination. We know, as we saw at the very beginning of this chapter, that Spinoza thinks that the text of the Bible is mutilated and confused. Yet he does not give up hope to find meaning within it. To that end, he elaborates a method of reading Scripture. Note that this does not involve—or at least so he says—the alleged discovery, or really imposition, of philosophical ideas on it. Rather, he says that he is reading Scripture as he would nature, that is, inductively from Scripture itself. What he derives from this reading are the fundamental good intentions of the prophets, which he summarizes as justice and lovingkindness (*charitas*).[15] All their imaginative constructs, the narratives, laws, and imperatives, aim at those ends. Thus, not only do we have a way of thinking about how the prophets could correct themselves

15 It should also be noted that there are other intermediate teachings, which Spinoza calls the "dogmas of the universal faith," that Spinoza derives from Scripture as common beliefs among religious sects that support the two cardinal virtues. For a discussion of these dogmas and their epistemic status and practical function, see Rosenthal (2001).

and members of their religious community, but also a way of how we can correct our reading of Scripture without requiring that we become philosophers.

In my reading, the real tension in religion that concerns Spinoza is not between imagination and reason but between two forms of the imagination itself: that between naïve religious belief (or superstition) and the more reflective form of prophetic critique. It is crucial in this view that this kind of fictionalism is not an imposition of philosophers on non-philosophers (as in the case of philosophical religion) but a natural critical attitude that arises in the context of the imaginative life. Part of this reflective stance within the imagination must involve not necessarily a philosophical understanding of how prophecy works, but some practical awareness of the tentativeness of religious narrative and law itself, its openness to interpretation and critique. It is this imaginative openness to interpretation that the worst forms of superstition resist.

Quasi-Fictionalism

The important question at this point is how prophets are able to arrive at the good without reasoning about it. The short answer to this important question is that they arrive at the good indirectly through experience, the long and tedious process of trial and error that is, in fact, related or exemplified as part of the divine narrative of the Israelites in the Bible. The long answer is that it is possible for imaginative structures to serve as ersatz structures of reason through indirect or analogous reference to the true laws of nature. In either response, the purely fictional nature of religious belief and the practices it requires is grounded in some conception of the truth, even if it is only indirectly understood by the leaders or adherents of the religion themselves. For that reason, I have added the modifier "quasi" to the kind of fictionalism that I am claiming Spinoza holds about religion. After all, even the imagination, with its tendency to cause false ideas, is part of the system of nature that can be known through reason.

We know that there are infinitely many perspectives that are expressed in and through the imagination. It is true that these perspectives are often consolidated through communal experience into more ubiquitous, shared, and dominant structures. Nonetheless, as we have seen, they are often contested, both internally and externally, not as much by philosophical challenges as by other imaginative experiences and their interpretations. There

is a lot to say here about how Spinoza conceives of religious toleration and coexistence within this conceptual framework. There is the possibility of judging and accepting (or rejecting) other religious perspectives and practices both on the basis of overlapping interpretations and of similar outcomes. It does not matter whether I think God is a fiery ball or you think he is a benevolent father in heaven if, in both cases, our beliefs lead to practices of justice and charity. Here, though, I want to focus on the way in which a philosophical perspective might serve to help us understand how these imaginative frameworks might be constrained.

Spinoza does think that even if there are infinite points of view from the imagination, there is a single view that is true from the point of view of reason.[16] Thus science, understood as the explanation of things through deducing true causes of things on the basis of reason, could help us not only arrive at true philosophical religion but could also indirectly limit the kinds of explanation provided in imaginative religion without reducing it to philosophical religion. A clear example of this method comes at the beginning of Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*. There Spinoza criticizes utopian political theory, which considers men not as they are but as we wish them to be, and praises instead the experienced statesman (TP 1.1-3; GIII/273). But there is a third point of view implicit in this method. For Spinoza is neither a utopian theorist nor a statesman. He is using the fruits of his science of human nature to describe the realistic conditions under which political systems can be informed. A statesman might learn from experience what human nature will or will not do, but he or she could also learn this from a scientific investigation of human nature. I take it that a philosopher could also, in this way, suggest ways to inform imaginative religious systems without reducing them to the simple truths of philosophical religion. We could also generate evaluative criteria so that we could see where different religious systems overlap from the point of view of reason, which would be an improvement of our inductive (never deductive) evaluation of these sets of beliefs within a tradition. The challenge of course would be how to use these rational criteria without undermining the affective fidelity to the particular imaginative tradition of revelation, which is important to its own authenticity and function.

16 In his recent book, Newlands has made a stronger claim, namely, that there are infinite conceptual schemes from the point of reason as well, but I disagree with it. See Newlands (2018).

There is much more to be said on this point. The key idea is that as long as truth is involved in some form or another within Spinoza's system, the fictional perspectives of the imagination will be subject to the constraints of truth, whether implicitly, through experience, or explicitly, through the invocation of various kinds of science.[17]

Conclusion

I began with a problem, namely, how is it possible that Scripture, the word of God, can be considered sacred after we have come to realize that the text itself is itself a human product and a very flawed one? The standard answer is that we need to replace superstitious religion with its problematic veneration of texts and specious metaphysical beliefs with rational religion based on philosophical truth. I have suggested that this view is flawed both textually and philosophically. It is textually flawed because it does not account for the positive function of imaginative religion that Spinoza articulates in the TTP. It is philosophically problematic because it underestimates the important and continuing role of the imagination in the life of all human beings, who, though they have the power of reason, nonetheless, as finite beings, are inevitably subject to the power of external things on us.

There is still a lot to be explained and argued for. Some obvious objections to a fictionalist account of religion arise. For instance, some would claim that authentic religious experience involves not only supernaturally validated, objective certainty about the event of revelation but also the inner conviction of the truth of Scripture. And by "inner conviction" is not meant the reflective and even ironic relation to the truth that a false fiction with practically good consequences involves. If this is a requirement of true religion, then I am not sure that even Spinoza's philosophical religion would suffice, let alone the imaginative ersatz I have described. There are also problems about how, assuming that we accept the general contours of Spinoza's account, he could justify the claims of moral objectivity in religious life against the inner slide toward relativism that is entailed by the infinite number of imaginative perspectives and the circular justification of any moral claim. And, just to raise one more problem, it is not clear what answer Spinoza (or I) could provide to the challenge of why we should bother with this imaginative form of religion, which is clearly epistemically

17 See also James (2012).

inferior to that of reason, when he provides a path to the more noble and true (in every sense) intellectual love of God in Part V of the *Ethics*.

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